

Gospel Centered Events **Social & Fellowship Events**

Before we delve deep into event planning strategies, let's take a moment to recap what got us to this point.

Historically speaking women's ministry was the every day life of women, who shared the same faith, living and interacting as community together. They studied the Word together, they prayed together, they served each other and along side one another. They were helper to their husbands, teachers of their children, and mentors to younger women. They “did life” together, as a family and helped forward the movement of the early church. As time passed and culture changed, community changed with it. We began to lose the feeling of community we once had, as we began to be pulled in multiple directions. Sunday services, book studies and fellowship events with quick injections of the Word began to replace deep study and authentic community. Eventually women's ministry programs found themselves filled with women with a greater interest in connection and socializing than digging deep into the scriptures. Our speakers were inspiring and motivating, our studies centered around the “pink parts” of the bible, and we wanted to feel better and uplifted... not convicted. Bible literacy paid a price, and we find ourselves amongst the trend of future generations of believers disengaging from the church.

Before we can fix the problem, we must recognize it for what it is. Women's Ministry turned into a social club sprinkled with visits from Jesus. As more time passed, our souls recognized it wasn't enough. Yet, we tried to replace it with more events to build community, Jesus was still on the side lines. We were still not fulfilled. Then, it happened... another shift. We began to recognize that we need more of Jesus, we need our events to become Gospel centered, but we had created an image of women's ministry that was antiquated and more like a social club. We have recognized we want to take it back, God is calling his daughters to action, but we have to undue the mess we created.

But how?

It begins with defining our mission statement or ministry vision, in conjunction with the church's greater vision. Then systematically changing our calendar of events from social events to gospel events, without neglecting the authentic community women are still seeking. We find a ministry that then leans heavier on the gospel.

So what does “gospel centered” really mean? What does that look like?

Trevin Wax identified gospel centered as a “*Christ-focused approach to the Bible intended to lead God's people to join His mission to seek and save the lost.*” It is our intentional purpose of turning the women's gaze to Christ. The move toward gospel-centered events, and ministry, is not going to be a quick answer... it's going to take time, patience, and willingness to change

The fact that our women are still seeking something greater is evident in their lack of commitment to long term bible studies, showing up at random events, volunteering but not long term, and even in the suggestions they are happy to give us... without willingness to be apart of the change. They are not happy with what we are offering, but at the same time, they don't know what it is they want. They don't even realize what is missing. We are not seeing lives transformed because we are not providing the tools to make it happen. But, when we go into an existing ministry, we can't expect to just scrap everything and start over. As much as many women may want something else, since they don't know

what that actually is, they will cling to familiar.

“But this is always how we have done ministry!”

“What do you mean no more brunches, I love brunches!”

“Those bible studies are too intense, I don't think anyone will show up.”

Do any of these sound familiar? They do to me, I've said them myself at one point or another. We don't need to send the women into a panic with a bunch of changes, but instead gently begin to lead the ministry in the right direction. Planting seeds, nurturing growth, and waiting patiently.

I happened to be at a conference, shopping in exhibition hall for a commemorative conference shirt and a book I wanted to gift to our Pastor's wife. As I was standing in line waiting to pay, an audio book caught my attention. It was only \$5, and I had been driving a LOT lately. I thought, why not? The audio book was about bible literacy. And, I would be undervaluing it, if I said anything but that it was life changing. It completely shifted my thoughts on how we were doing ministry successfully, and how we were failing. When I finished the CDs, I began to share them with women in the church. One at a time. I was planting a seed without being too aggressive about trying to change the way we do things for our study groups. As one would finish the CD's they would tell another, and so someone else would be interested in borrowing them. I started a slow movement in the church, a stirring, that I pray God will always keep in motion.. one person to the next. I still don't have my CD's back, and I hope I never do get them back. Let them keep moving hand to hand, heart to heart.

When we start to turn the focus of our small group studies to direct study of the Word, we are turning their gaze to Christ. It can be easier to change the direction of the small group, than changing the larger social events. We get caught up in events needing to be “fun” and “entertaining” in order to keep women interested in coming. At least that is what we think. Yet, we find ourselves in women's ministry planning meetings going over the same questions every year.

How do we get more women to attend our events?.

How do we get more women leading small groups or bible studies?

Why do the 20 somethings never come to any of the women's ministry events?

How do we reach the older women if they only come to the brunches?

Are we seeing any results? Are women connecting to the church? Are lives changing?

We lament over the lack of any sort of track record for the ministry, the events aren't growing, it's just a revolving door of new people coming in as others leave. How many women's ministry events have you held in your church, where a woman come up to leadership afterward wanting to pray, or to accept Christ into her heart? What if that was our goal, pointing them to Christ?

What if you walked into your Pastor's office and said: *“Pastor, at the last brunch we had three women who wanted to accept Christ as their savior. The event before there were six. Do you think you could be present, even if just at the end, for the next event? In case we have a response again? We'd love for you to be there to pray with these women.”*

Even if your Pastor made the decision that you could handle that yourselves, or provided the leadership team with some training for those types of moments, how could he do anything but take women's ministry seriously?

I heard Pastor Voddie Baucham state that we have one job, that is to prepare people for eternity. It's funny how when you reword it like that, it suddenly seems a lot more clear where our focus should lie.

If we are called to bring the gospel to others, to prepare them for eternity.... are we doing a good job?

Yes, we need to engage people... but we engage when we show that we are a caring and loving community; not by having a fancy brunch full of carefully crafted centerpieces (not that there will not be an appropriate time for that!). Yes, we need to reach people emotionally... and we do so through our personal testimonies and sharing the very Word of God. We do not need a pep rally to get through another crazy holiday season.

To facilitate this gospel centered change in the social and fellowship events we start with really looking at how we structure the event. A typical women's ministry is going to meet at some point and figure out a rough schedule for the year or season. At this meeting, a lot of ideas are going to be shared. How many bible studies should we offer and when? Do we want to do a community service project? Should we have a brunch with a speaker? While sharing ideas are great, we have to start in prayer. We need to be praying that God will reveal to us the events that HE wants accomplished, and then we pray that as we make those plans we keep them gospel centered.

As we define out the schedule for the year, we can begin working on the details of each of the events. Just like you want to have an established vision for the ministry, you also want a mission or purpose for the events. Why is it important to have this event, what is the purpose it is going to serve for the ministry, the church and even the women themselves?

Fellowship events may serve the following purposes:

- Introduce new women in the church to others in our church family.
- Convene the women into a group to share information that pertains the women as a whole.
- Kick off or celebration of certain programs, holidays, or special announcements.
- Avenue for inviting the community to visit the church.
- Opportunities for local churches to get to know each other.
- Fundraising Opportunities for the ministry

Many Women's Ministries will have a dinner or luncheon to kick off the start to the year, often serving like a meet and greet. This is especially helpful when a church has more than one service, as it allows the women to meet others they wouldn't necessarily meet otherwise. Brunches, Luncheons and Dinners are also a great way to kick off Small Groups, MOPS programs, or other long term activities. If you are planning a larger event, these fellowship events are also great for soliciting volunteers and fundraising. When you have so many women in one location, it's the perfect opportunity to make announcements about upcoming events not just in the ministry, but in the church. We can also celebrate women in the church by having special luncheons for holidays like Mother's Day, or to introduce the women of the church to new leadership, particularly when a new Pastor comes and we want to welcome in his wife and family. Several churches that I know of have large annual baby showers annual to support the local crisis pregnancy centers. If you are making significant changes to

your women's ministry programs, this can also be a great way to share those goals and changes with the women in your church. Bringing the body of women into the fold is always a way to make them feel important in the ministry and the church.

Once we understand our purpose for having the event, we can then begin working out the details further. We can create the time line, shopping list, and establish any other needs for the event. This is the right time to make sure we are ultimately making the gospel the center of the event. It should be part of the planning process, not an after thought. The question becomes: *How do we execute this event for this purpose, and still keep Christ at the center?*

Brunch/Luncheon/Dinner Details:

- Select a theme name. There is something about theme names that get women's attention more so than just saying "women's brunch". The theme name gives them an idea of what to expect.
- Select a speaker. Will this be someone from within the church sharing a testimony, or someone from outside the church being hired in to speak? Make sure all speakers are vetted to ensure they are in alignment with the church's beliefs.
- Create your To-Do List and Time Line for the event. I find it is easiest to designate duties and get volunteers once you know exactly what you are in need of. Also be sure to include set up and clean up in the time line, and for the volunteer list too.
- Plan the budget.
- Promote the Event.

When holding events like this, it is very important to simplify them without losing effect. I once took over an event for a woman who was being called out of town. She handed me a three and a half page check list for a women's brunch. I couldn't help but think: *No wonder the team has been considering stopping brunches!*

If we go too big, it costs more money, more time, and more volunteers. If we can keep it simple, but still elegant, people are more apt to volunteer. Consider streamlining for events like these.

- Invest in plain white linen table clothes that can be accessorized to match the color scheme or season of the event.
- Utilizing quality and recyclable plastic ware for the table settings, lessens clean up time, is usually budget friendly, and yet you can still feel like a good steward by recycling them.
- Create a basic centerpiece that can be accessorized as needed. At our church we have a gold tray, with a candle holder and candle for every table. Sometimes, we pull the candle out and use fresh flowers from someone's garden. Other times, we leave the candles in, and put pine cones around the base of the candle holder. Flowers and pine cones can often be found for free in someone's yard or even the church property. If you are a coastal town, seashells litter your beaches, as well as drift wood and sea glass. But, if you must invest in purchasing décor, make sure it is something you can use multiple times before discarding. Use coupons to help lessen the cost.
- If your speaker is being hired in: a simple thank you card, along with the payment is sufficient. If it is a woman from within the church body: consider a small gift of appreciation.
- When having an event to announce something like Small Groups, a Conference, or if you are trying to rally volunteers, have a table with sign up information available at the brunch. Many women may forget by the time they get back home, even with the best of intentions. Having a

sign up sheet available, or at least information they can take home with them to serve as a reminder, will help you and the women out in the long run. If your church has embraced technology, and has gone paper free, you can have a computer, laptop or tablet available where people can sign up via the church website.

- Look into the talents of your church as well, consider having music, a skit, or even a spoken word poetry presentation as part of the events. This is a great way to turn their gaze toward God, through corporate worship or engaging performances.
- If you are going to utilize a video, music, etc. make sure you have women on your team who are trained to use the sound equipment, or arrange for someone familiar with the equipment to be there for that portion of the event.
- You will need to decide if this will be potluck style, where the women all bring a dish, or if you are having the event catered. Will there be childcare? Who is doing the childcare? How much money will that cost? Is the ministry paying for it, or are the women paying for it? How will they register and who will collect the money?

A sample schedule might look like this:

9:00am	Doors Open, Women Are Greeted, Name Tags Distributed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who are the greeters:</i> _____ • <i>Who is handing out name tags:</i> _____ • <i>Who is purchasing name tags:</i> _____
9:15am	Welcome and Prayer Over Meal, Dismiss Women to Buffet Line <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who is giving the welcome address:</i> _____ • <i>Who is praying over the meal:</i> _____
9:50am	Special Music / Skit (while the women are finishing their meal) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who is introducing the Performance (and offering if applicable)</i> • <i>Who is Performing:</i> _____ • <i>What do they need (tech wise):</i> _____ • <i>Who is running tech:</i> _____ • <i>Are we taking an offering?</i> _____ <i>Who will collect/count:</i> _____
10:20am	Speaker is Introduced <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who is Introducing the Speaker:</i> _____ • <i>Who is the Speaker:</i> _____ • <i>What is the topic of the presentation:</i> _____
10:50am	Closing Remarks (Thank You, Announcements, Dismissal) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who will be at the Small Group Sign Up Table:</i> _____
11:10am	Clean Up

- Some ministries will have the opportunity to set up their space they day before the event, but if you are setting up same day, be sure to allot plenty of time for setting up. It will always take you longer than you expect.
- Consider other duties after the event, such as laundering the table cloths. Account for that in your planning.

Your check list might look something like this:

- o Purchase Table Cloths, Plates, Cups, Napkins, and Tableware
- o Purchase Centerpiece accents
- o Purchase Name Tags, Pens, Clipboards
- o Print Sign Up Sheets for Small Groups
- o Ask Pastor Smith's wife if she will lead worship, if unavailable ask Amy
- o Print up song lyrics for the tables, or put into projection software (tech?)
- o Find speaker for event, ask Pastor's wife for suggestions
- o Who will run the tech board
- o Who will open up the church (key holder: _____)
- o Set Up Team: _____
- o Clean Up Team: _____

Ways to make this a Gospel Centered event:

- Worship Music
- Personal Testimony
- Speaker Topics (Scriptures, Bible Literacy, Christian Character, Evangelism, etc)
- Promoting Growth Opportunities (Small Groups, Church Service, Volunteerism, etc)
- Take Home Items that point toward reflecting every day on God (memory verse cards, gratitude journals, small devotions, etc).

One year, our women's ministry gave out gratitude journals. We went to the local dollar store and purchased Month at a Glance calendars, we decorated the covers of them with scrapbook paper, and gave them out at the end of the brunch. We challenged the women to simply write down one thing per day that they wanted to praise God for. This was a very simple gesture, but it was an avenue to put their gaze on God over self, and over the trials they may be facing.

Another fellowship event that I have seen as successful is a women's kayak trip or painting night. What we need, however, is more than just a girls day or night out. We need to keep Christ at the center. So, instead of selecting a random painting from the studio, you could do something more personalized... like painting a cross or something that looks like a stained glass window. Or, if you are going to pick something from the studio catalog... ask if you can embed paper with printed scriptures. Asking each woman to provide her favorite piece of scripture, causes her to stop and think about what her personal life verse might be. Or, for a woman who doesn't read her bible much, it will give her a good reason to pick one up and start thumbing through it. And, instead of joining in one of their existing classes, schedule a private studio night for your group.

If you select a kayak trip, consider using a company that has kayaks and canoes to rent, and using the guided tour. This is very comforting for the first timer, and not everyone who wants to participate has access to a kayak. Instead of joining in on a public guided tour, set up a private tour for your group. When you set up private tours, or studio time as in the painting night example, you have a lot more control over the schedule.

Then as part of the event you can include activities that are gospel centered. Have someone lead with a devotion, for the painting night. Or, after the kayak trip have lunch nearby in the park, and have a prayer circle. Our women's ministry did an evening guided kayak tour, which included a bonfire at the end. The women brought marshmallows to roast and sang worship songs by the campfire. Part of what makes these events successful is they require virtually no preparation time from the ministry. And then,

the less time you spend worrying about the little details the more time you can spend focusing on how to bring Christ into the group.

There are many other fellowship ideas that can work for groups of any size. Is a Christian movie coming to your local theater? Meet for dinner ahead, enjoyed the movie, and then go for dessert after to discuss. Is a popular worship band coming to town? Put together a group, and carpool to the concert. Meet at a local park to pray over each other and the community. Pack some lunches, head to the beach and sing worship songs or read aloud from the scriptures.

You can take any fun activity, from a luncheon to going berry picking as a group, and invite Christ to not only join you... but take the lead.